

Courtesans and Choreographers: The (Re)Placement of Women in the History of *Kathak* Dance*

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In the move from feudal empire to British colony to independent nation in less than 300 years, India's traditions have needed to constantly adapt to changing politics, patronage, and philosophies. The trajectory of change through the first half of the twentieth century combined re-invention with rediscovery, as multiple facets of Indian culture met each other in the heady environment surrounding the struggle for and achievement of independence in 1947. During the years leading up to independence, a flowering of interest in music and dance led to a period described as a "Renaissance" or the "Neo-Classical" period of Indian music and dance. These terms, which suggest a reclaiming of ancient or lost traditions after a period of decline, underline the crucial role that the reclamation of the performing arts as the rich and worthy cultural inheritance of an independent people played in the raising of national consciousness and pride during the struggle against the colonial Raj.

Yet, scholars also analyze the mid-twentieth century as a period of modernity when the newly independent India broke with the colonial past and re-invented itself as an autonomous nation-state. Most histories of music and dance written in the twentieth century combine this modernist sense of rupture with the nationalist need for an ancient Hindu past, offering telescoped pasts that leap from Vedic to modern times in a few giant steps (Devi 1972; Banerji 1982; Narayan 1998; Sinha 2000; Walker 2004 among many others). Although by and large understandable in the context of the fight for freedom, one trend in twentieth-century scholarship has been an unquestioning acceptance of unilinear, evolutionary histories of music and dance that, in their

eagerness to connect with Vedic antiquity, omit any analysis of the immediate past and marginalize many of the major players. In the history of the north Indian dance form of Kathak, it is the contribution of women that is most often passed over or neglected. In the development of Kathak, the tangle of traditionalism and modernism resulted in a number of shifts and ruptures. The first break with the past was the disenfranchisement of the hereditary women who were prominent holders of the dance tradition from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This allowed a connection to a more ancient past to be emphasized through empowering hereditary male performers called Kathaks as hegemonous "owners" of the dance. Furthermore, in a final ironic twist, the high-class non-hereditary women who had replaced the hereditary women on the stage (see later) and who had played important roles in shaping twentieth-century Kathak were in their turn passed over in the continued validation of the male-dominated "tradition" that they had in many ways helped to invent.

The Kathak they helped to shape is today a virtuosic and specialized genre practiced largely by highly trained professionals. Although occasionally performed in small venues for a select audience of connoisseurs, Kathak is most often danced on a stage in a recital or concert hall, and it reached a certain level of international status and recognition during the second half of the twentieth century. The dance itself combines polyrhythmic items, footwork sequences, and exciting spins with slower, meditative sections that use graceful hand and wrist movements, elegant body postures, and subtle swaying motions. Complex rhythmic "pieces" closely related to drum repertoire contrast with segments depicting short scenes or telling longer stories, and both abstract and mimetic sections combine precomposed and improvised material. The variety of dance items and movement patterns within today's Kathak are witness to its syncreticism—this is not an art form that can be traced to a single origin but a recent and ongoing fusion of a number of north Indian performance traditions. Promotional material about Kathak commonly alludes to its blend of Hindu and Muslim traditions but unhesitatingly attributes the dance's origins to the Hindu hereditary male performers called Kathaks. These men are still considered authorities on Kathak's authentic style and continue in many ways to dominate the dance world. Although one cannot deny the involvement of these male musicians and dancers in north Indian dance, their largely unchallenged hegemony through the twentieth century belies the influence of women, hereditary and non-hereditary, on the development of Kathak dance.

An exploration of women's contributions to the development of Kathak is timely in a number of ways. Current research in the history of Hindustani music in the decades leading up to independence by such scholars as Bakhle (2005) and Kippen (2006) has begun a process of deconstructing revised histories, revealing a period of Sanskritization and classicization in which many performing arts that had been performed and disseminated for centuries by hereditary Muslim specialists were documented, published, and promoted as the inheritance of a devotional Hindu past worthy of a pan-Indian independent future.¹ Furthermore, one of the most contentious issues surrounding Indian music and dance during the period of cultural reclamation was the historical connection of performing arts to hereditary female performers associated with the sex trade. As patronizing and eventually learning music and dance gradually became acceptable to the middle classes, the arts needed to be purged of this association. This sort of gentrification, however, is not uncommon. Recent work in dance history and historiography in a variety of cultures has uncovered similar stories—sanitized pasts, classicized traditions, and contradictory oral and written histories—which point again to webs of interacting influences rather than the straight-line progressions so often found in "official" versions of history (Buckland 2006). The first step in reclaiming a past for women in north Indian dance, therefore, is an examination of the dance of hereditary female performers of recent centuries.

Hereditary Women

As mentioned earlier, the association of the performing arts with "public" women, dancing girls, and red light districts was a barrier to their reclamation and acceptance by the middle classes. History itself needed to be cleansed of this link, and the promotion of music and dance as Hindu, pious, and preserved through male lines was adopted in large part to accomplish this. Hereditary female performers, however, were not one homogeneous group, and the most refined among them were urbane, literate, and highly trained in the performance of poetry, vocal music, and dance. These women, whom we now tend to call courtesans or *tavayafs*, were for more than a century among the primary culture bearers of north Indian vocal music and dance. Associated with the decadent and effete courts of Muslim aristocrats, connected with brothels and an illegal underclass, and often Muslim

themselves, the tavayafs found themselves pushed to the margins of musical society by the reforms of the early twentieth century.

There is now substantial research on the history of women in Hindustani music. Since the 1980s, scholars have begun to give credit to the contributions of the female performers of the past (Manuel 1989; Post 1989), and recent work has also included their living descendents, giving voice to a long-marginalized section of north Indian society (Maciszewski 2001a and 2001b). The role of hereditary women performers in the preservation and dissemination of tradition, not to mention their contribution to artistic excellence, has finally been recognized, and advocacy projects encouraging and promoting the musical arts of today's female hereditary singers are ongoing (Maciszewski 2004). Yet, the connections between courtesan performance practice and today's north Indian dance (now identified as Kathak) have received less attention (one of the few scholars to examine this connection in any depth is Chakravorty 2007).²

The artistic practice of tavayafs during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a synthesis of poetry, music, gestures, and dance. To historians' best knowledge, the seated tavayaf, accompanied by male musicians playing *tabla* (pair of tuned hand drums) and *sarangi* (upright bowed fiddle), would sing songs called *thumri* or *ghazal* with evocative and ambiguous lyrics, repeating and elaborating certain phrases while illustrating the poetic text with mimetic gestures. After the melody and lyrics had been sufficiently explored, the tavayaf would rise to dance. The rhythm of the *tabla* would change from the often slower rhythmic cycle of the song to a quick pace and insert syncopated patterns called *laggi*. The dance would expand on the theme of the song text but incorporate movements of the whole body, including characteristic postures and stylized walks. Although courtesan performance included music, poetry, song, and dance, the current separation of these genres has resulted in most scholars' investigating only one or perhaps two parts at a time. Excellent publications on *thumri* (Manuel 1989; Du Perron 2007), *ghazal* (Qureshi 1989), *sarangi* (Bor 1986/87 Qureshi 1997) and *tabla* (Kippen 1988 and 2006), while providing much needed musical and linguistic analysis and insight into the historical context of tavayaf performance, most often relegate discussion of dance and gestures into a few short paragraphs.

The dance of nineteenth-century women, however, has been documented in considerable detail both in the travel writings of the colonizing Europeans and in a number of Urdu sources connected with the Nawabi court in Lucknow. Nowhere in any of these sources

is the dance of the hereditary women (or "Nautch girls" as the British termed them) called Kathak, but ubiquitous in the twentieth-century literature is a curious accusation that the dancing girls adopted a pre-existing devotional dance called Kathak and corrupted it.³ Although this belief raises a host of external issues, the greatest historical weakness is the assumption that the women could not have a performance tradition of their own that predated their contact with the hereditary male Kathaks, who are said to have migrated to the courts. An examination of contemporary documentation, however, not only supports the assertion that the female dancers of the period performed material that differed from the dance of the male Kathaks but also offers strong evidence that parts of this female dance contributed significantly to the twentieth-century stage dance called Kathak.

There is a wealth of largely unstudied information about nineteenth-century north Indian dance in a number of treatises that date from after 1860. A nostalgic need to record a disappearing culture arose after the annexation of the princely state of Awadh and the dismantling of its capital at Lucknow by the British after the failed First War of Independence in 1857.⁴ There was an outpouring of documentation not only by former courtiers, but also by Wajid Ali Shah, the deposed Nawab of Awadh himself. *Madun-ul Musiqi* (1869) by Mohammad Karam Imam, *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* (1884) by Sadat Ali Khan, and *Bani* (1877?) by Wajid Ali Shah, all contain information about dancers and musicians, rhythm and melody, and dance items.⁵ To these three nineteenth-century documents, the early twentieth-century collection of articles by Abdul Halim Sharar entitled *Guzishta Lucknow* can also be added. Comparing these sources with the descriptions of "nautch" performances in the colonial travel writings provides a reasonably accurate picture of the dance styles of the time.

There are indications in both *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* and *Guzishta Lucknow* that men and women did not necessarily perform the same repertoire or in the same manner. According to Sharar, the dance of women functioned "to portray amorous dalliance with elegance and grace . . . and to display feelings of love" whereas the men danced "to show sprightliness and vigour in their movements in accordance with the rhythm" (Sharar 1975: 141–42). This is supported very strongly in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, wherein specific dance items are associated with male dancers called either Bhands or Kathaks. The manuscript includes the *bols*, or oral notation, for some of the rhythmic dance genres now performed in Kathak dance. One of these, the *parmelu*,

is singled out as having higher status than the other rhythmic dances and “performed by famous Kathaks, that is to say dancers” (Khan 1884: 153). The dances in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* are alternately called *nritt* (a Sanskrit term for non-representational dance), *raq* (Arabic for dance), or *gat* (a further term meaning dance and used in all three treatises). In the detailed list of twenty gats, three are assigned to male dancers: the plate gat, the plate and bowl gat, and the *mardani* gat. The *mardani* gat is particularly interesting and seems a direct correspondent to the footwork patterns of today: “This is a male *gat*, that is the style and kind belonging to the *Bhands*. In this *gat* . . . the arms are folded in the front. . . . The *bols* are played out by the feet and so the *ghungurus* are set to the *pakhawaj*. However, this is the job of *Kathaks*” (Khan 1884: 173). In *Madun-ul Musiqi*, only one of the twenty-one *gats* listed is for male dancers: the “Krishna gat,” which is a dazzling spin on the knees performed in the devotional folk theater *Ras Lila*, “is practiced among the *Kathaks*, [and] often not danced at the beginning of a *mehfil* [or salon concert]” (Imam 1869: 204–5).

But what of the graceful and elegant dances which displayed the feelings of love and were performed by the women? One finds them in the majority of the gats in both *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* and *Madun-ul Musiqi*, and also in Wajid Ali Shah’s book, *Bani*. To perform these dances, which seem clearly designed for the “amorous dalliances” of *tavayaf* performance, the dancer is to “dive into the ocean of love and tempo” (Imam 1869: 205), and go around the entire gathering, locking eyes with the audience members so that everyone present is “wounded with the arrow of her eyelashes” (Khan 1884: 169–70). In Imam’s work, one finds gats entitled “beauty” “coquettish,” “beloved,” and “amorous glance,” and in Shah’s book there are “pleading,” “loving,” “flirting,” and “winking” gats. All three sources include gats which instruct the dancer to gesture with her veil, skirt, or end of her sari, and *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* in particular contains very specific directions about how the dancer should use her eyes. Both Khan and Imam also include directions for subtle body movements: dancers are to keep “all body parts both internal and external” (Imam 1869: 204), moving “fluidly and pleasingly” (Khan 1884: 161). These descriptions of graceful yet alluring dances involving elegant postures and gestures with veils are corroborated in the colonial material. In the “nautch” parties observed by the British Sahibs and Memsahibs, female dancers sang and danced by moving with gliding or “shuffling” steps, making slow pirouettes, and pulling their “shawls” on and off their heads and faces (for more information and complete citations see Dyson 1978: 336–56).

Setting the wounding eyelashes and Victorian prudery aside, it is not difficult to connect much of this choreographic description to repertoire in today’s Kathak dance. The graceful swaying found in *thaat*, the introductory section of a Kathak performance, seems similar to the fluid coordination of body parts detailed in the treatises, and the gliding walk, graceful turns, and manipulation of the veil in the travel writings seems easily to evoke the items still called by the name *ghungat ki gat*. Furthermore, when one begins to examine the detailed instructions for the gats themselves and compare today’s Kathak postures with the small sketches included in both *Bani* and *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, undeniable links between Kathak and courtesan dance emerge. The first gat in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* is the “Heir’s gat” (*Janasheen ki Gat*), which is taught to beginners (Figure 18.1). The text instructs the dancer thus:

The right hand is positioned above the head, with an open palm’s distance between the head and the hand. The right elbow should be at the earlobe level. The left arm should be straight like an arrow, the chest should be raised. . . . Fingers and wrists of both hands should keep swinging softly and flexibly, and the palms closed like fists should keep opening on *tat* and *ta*. (Khan 1884: 165)

With some slight modifications—one does not make fists nor keep the left arm so straight—this stance is ubiquitous in today’s Kathak. It remains the first posture learned in the string of charming cameos called *gat nikas*, but is most characteristic, together with the rhythmic swaying included in the manuscript, in *thaat*.⁶ It also has a place in the rhythmic compositions, where it is struck at the end of a piece. This position, so characteristically Kathak yet so prominent in courtesan dance, has gathered mythological explanations to explain its presence: one story connects the posture with a dancing demon who had stolen Shiva’s magic bracelet (Zutshi 1937; Gopal and Dadachanji 1951), and a later one explains that the stance represents Krishna with his peacock feather crown (Vatsyayan 1974; Natavar 1997). Neither the instructions in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, nor those in *Madun-ul Musiqi*, however, associate the *Janasheen* position with a Hindu deity, even though both manuscripts contain discussions of the dances of Shiva, Parvati, and Krishna.⁷

The other gats in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, *Madun-ul Musiqi*, and *Bani* most closely connected with today’s Kathak, in particular with *gat nikas*, are the many which include gestures with the *ghungat* or veil (Figure 18.2). The colonial writers also made much of the dancers’



Figure 18.1: *Jonashen ki Gat* (Heir's Gat) *Sarmaya-i-Ishrat*: 165.
(Used with permission from the British Library)



Figure 18.2: *Gat Chehre ki* (Face Gat) *Sarmaya-i-Ishrat*: 168.
(Used with permission from the British Library)

covering and uncovering their heads and faces with “shawls,” “mantles,” and “screens of gauze” (Dyson 1978), and most dancers in both indigenous and colonial iconography hold veils or large dupattas as they dance. In Kathak today, loose veils would be a hazard when performing the virtuosic rhythmic material and spins, but most costumes for women include a dupatta, often made of gold tissue or gauzy silk, pinned modestly across the body or over the head (see Figure 18.3). Yet, although the securely fastened fabric generally precludes its use in expressive dancing, Kathak dancers still perform the gestures of the *ghungat gats* using an intriguingly codified vocabulary of pantomimed movements.

The graceful *tavayaf*, with her repertoire of swaying postures and veil gestures, evocative songs and flirtatious eye contact, is no longer a feature of the north Indian performing arts. Her most characteristic song genre, the *thumri*, is bereft of its expressive movements and now sung at the end of classical vocal recitals as a “light dessert.” Yet, *thumri* is also now a dance genre, and although the dancers do not sing, their movement vocabulary is replete with gestures from the *salon* of the *tavayaf*. *Thaat*, the graceful *salaami* and *aamad* (entry) compositions inserted into its elegant stream, and *gat nikas* also seem irrefutably descended from the dances of hereditary women. Even more deeply absorbed is the body language and use of the eyes; the subtle swaying of the body called *kasak-masak* and the arresting glance that usually marks the end of a piece are subtle but insistent witnesses to nineteenth-century women’s dance in today’s Kathak.

Displaced and Replaced

The hereditary female dancers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not disappear, nor did their repertoire vanish. Yet, social and political forces during the hundred years between the beginning and end of the Raj conspired to marginalize them to the extent that they were almost written out of history. When the Raj was formed in 1858 after the First War of Independence, one of its primary concerns was the creation of new laws and initiatives so that another opportunity for rebellion would never emerge. The city of Lucknow had been one of the epicenters and the site of some of the most horrifying stories of British suffering. The resulting demolitions, increase in police, health inspections, and seizure of property had devastating effects on the independent and refined world of the *tavayafs*. Deprived of aristocratic



Figure 18.3: Kathak Dancer Sudeshna Maulik in costume with a veil.
(Used with permission)

patronage and encouraged by the Cantonment Act of 1864 to relocate near the army regiments, former courtesan-songstresses found themselves equated with the common prostitutes who served the army (Oldenburg 1984; Rao 1996).

Unfortunately, the rising Indian middle class had little more taste or appreciation for the refined world of the *tavayaf* than the British occupiers. The colonial officials had learned quickly that it was easiest to administrate the multicultural, multilingual Indian population through a layer of indigenous bureaucrats. Education was considered the key, and young Indian men from respectable families were thus exported to Britain for tuition. In a delightfully ironic turn of events, the Indians absorbed European philosophies of equality and liberty along with cricket and English grammar. Reacquainted on their return with the racism and brutality of British rule, they formed the core of the Independence Movement, including the Congress Party, Muslim League, and various "quit India" campaigns. While the educated activists pondered the fact of their country's occupation and searched for potential weaknesses that allowed it, Victorian morality replaced Enlightenment philosophy, and social reforms began to focus on "fallen women" as a salient symptom of a culture in decline. The resultant "anti-Nautch" movement was as successful in the disenfranchisement of hereditary female performers as the British efforts in 1857, and the lobby, which began at a public meeting in Madras in 1893, set out to convince leaders and socialites to cease their patronage of "public" women who danced. The final result, the Devadasi Abolition Bill, was one of the first acts of the new Indian Parliament. The beginnings of both British imperial and independent Indian rule were thus marked by laws controlling women (Forbes 1996; Rao 1996; Sundar 1995 among others).

The "rescue" of music and eventually dance from their association with decadent courts, loose behavior, and the sex trade, and their reclamation as national cultural treasures was largely the work of a few reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore, Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar all played important parts in the collection, documentation, and dissemination of Indian music to the middle-class audiences and amateurs who had previously disowned it. Modernization and classicization were central to their reforms, and although their work was certainly a reaction against years of colonial disrespect and lack of patronage, it managed on the other hand to support the writings

of colonial scholars like Sir William Jones (1882 [1784]) who claimed that the music of India was above all ancient and Hindu. The foundation of music colleges permitted any Indian to learn music previously disseminated through families of hereditary performers, and the organization of music festivals allowed large audiences to hear music previously only available at select gatherings of connoisseurs. This simultaneously democratized the performing arts and detached them from their immediate roots, disenfranchising and marginalizing many of the predominantly Muslim hereditary artists (for more information see especially Bakhle 2005, but also Kippen 2006 and Du Perron 2007). The marginalization of hereditary performers had a different impact on men and women. Although many histories still emphasize ancient Sanskrit roots over the role played by Muslim hereditary musicians, they cannot completely ignore their presence, and male hereditary artists remain among the leading performers and teachers today. It was easy, on the other hand, to ignore, indeed to erase, the presence of hereditary women. Tainted by colonial laws, muzzled by the anti-Nautch, and made redundant by a series of shifts in patronage, the *tavayafs*, lead artists and culture bearers of previous centuries, disappeared off the stage and became no more than an embarrassing footnote in the history of Indian music and dance. Yet, these same shifts in patronage, the creation of education institutions, and the gentrification of performing arts made it possible for a different group of women to enter the performing arts. Middle- and upper-class women from non-hereditary musical backgrounds, began, tentatively, to enter the public sphere as the hereditary women became less visible and quickly came to dominate the world of female vocal music and eventually dance.⁸ The role of non-hereditary women in the development of twentieth-century north Indian dance would be fundamental.

Dance in north India had been performed traditionally by both men and women, and aspects of both male and female hereditary dance can be found in today's Kathak. Yet, as music and dance were peeled apart in the social upheaval surrounding the anti-Nautch movement, the most talented of the hereditary women largely ceased dancing and became singers. This left the repertoire of both male and female dance in the hands of the hereditary men, the caste called Kathak, who had performed with the *tavayafs* as their accompanists and teachers. Interestingly, when cultural reformers became interested in dance, it was largely women who were instrumental in its reclamation.

The individual non-hereditary young women who became the first "ladies" of Kathak often experienced social difficulties and familial opposition to their careers. Nevertheless, the twin facts that the hereditary men (the Kathaks) were Hindu and that the hereditary women (the tavyayafs) seemed permanently removed from the dance facilitated the adoption of Kathak as a "classical" dance into the newly modernized and nationalized performing arts.

Non-Hereditary Women

The women dancers of the nineteenth century have, by and large, no discernible individual identities. Although Imam provided names of female performers in *Madun-ul Musiqi*, there are no matrilineal family trees through which one can trace their descendents nor are there oral histories that include their names. The first few generations of women dancers of the twentieth century, on the other hand, are a documented group of individuals, many of whom are still actively involved in the performing arts. Yet, although their names and faces are well-known and some books on Kathak dance include their biographies (Kothari 1989), many of their contributions are not recognized or have been absorbed into the legends and legacies of the hereditary male dancers. In this parallel disenfranchisement, both the authority of tradition and the genius of creativity are attributed to the male Kathaks, with the cultural dispossession of the tavyayafs sometimes blamed solely on the non-hereditary women.

The young women who entered the world of performing arts as Kathak dancers in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s usually faced immense disapproval from both family members and society at large. The opposition to the nautch had been built on a social division between the "professional" or "public" women who sang and danced and the respectable married women who stayed at home, and it went far beyond imported colonial prudery. Many of the social reforms of the previous century, however, had focused on women's issues, with Indian reformers as actively involved as British agencies (Forbes 1996; Minault 1998 among others), and many of the women who entered the world of performing arts before and after independence came from families who were not entirely opposed to emancipation. A complete history of the contributions and legacy of each significant female figure in the recent history of Kathak is beyond the scope of this essay and will have to wait for a future opportunity. My focus here on the activities of a

few women associated with the capital city of Delhi, therefore, is made with the recognition that many stories and important dancers with careers outside the capital are being omitted.

Although Leila Sokhey (known as Madam Menaka) is generally credited with bringing Kathak onto the world stage during the 1930s (Joshi 1989; Kothari 1989: 151–52), it was Nirmula Joshi, an educated connoisseur of music and dance, who officially brought the dance to Delhi. Although Nirmula Joshi did learn music and dance from hereditary performers, it was her administrative initiatives that helped bring Kathak dance into the public arena. In 1937, she founded the Hindustani School of Music and Dance in Delhi and invited top male hereditary musicians and dancers to teach there. Chief among the dancers was the hereditary Kathak, Achchan Maharaj. This first school eventually closed down, but subsequent institutions founded after independence—the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, the Kathak Kendra, and the Sangit Natak Akademi, still central arts organizations today—all benefited from Joshi's energies and organizational skills. Central to her contribution was her importation of culture bearers to Delhi from other contexts of defunct or declining patronage. The gathering of many of the top musicians and dancers of the time at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra in the 1950s, combined with the nationalist agenda of cultural reclamation, made Delhi a fertile and creative center of artistic re-creation (Khokar 1998, 2004; Vidyarthi 1999).

The ongoing efforts of cultural reclamation made it necessary for the new institutions to continue distancing performing arts from the sensuous world of the tavyayaf and the disdained colonial nautch. Although the hereditary male Kathaks who taught at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra had themselves taught courtesans in Lucknow, hereditary female dancers and singers were, with very few exceptions, not welcome.⁹ Instead, the new Indian government offered scholarships to encourage young middle- or upper-class women from non-musical families to study the classical dance now called Kathak.¹⁰ As the first young women cleared a path, the trickle became a torrent, and by the 1960s, the Kathak classes of hereditary gurus Shambhu Maharaj and Sundar Prasad were brimming. A list of the names of these women provides a substantial "who's who" of Kathak dance for their generation (Khokar 1998).

The first non-hereditary student of Kathak guru Shambhu Maharaj was Maya Rao, who had traveled north from her home in Bangalore searching for substantial training in Kathak. She had a background

in music, Kathak, and the Oriental dance of Uday Shankar and had already in her early 1920s taught dance and begun to choreograph at the school she founded in Bangalore. Arriving in Delhi at the age of 25 on full scholarship, she devoted herself to her new studies yet also gradually influenced the dance's presentation, introducing many of the organizational features now considered traditional performance practice. Maya Rao had an interest in historical research, and many of her choreographic creations, all accomplished with the approval of both Shambhu Maharaj and Nirmula Joshi, sought to connect the movement vocabulary of Kathak with the poetry and prayers of the past. During this period, Maya Rao introduced Sanskrit devotional items such as *vandana* or *sloka* into the Kathak repertoire, and created the first choreography of the *Saraswati vandana*. Faced with the intuitive and somewhat fragmented teaching method of her guru, she suggested that the repertoire be organized into "families" of similar genres and forms and designed a progressive curriculum through which they could be transmitted. The informal and fluid performance style of Kathak at the time also disturbed her, and she instituted the order of performance connected to the gradual increase of tempo found in vocal and instrumental music. Rather than allowing the dancer to present items in any order, Rao created the now accepted format beginning with the newly introduced *vandana* and progressing through slower items like *thaat* and *aamad* to the exciting finale of fast *tukras*, *gat nikas*, and footwork (Maya Rao, personal communication; Khokar 2004).

Maya Rao was initially Shambhu Maharaj's sole student, but subsequent years brought other non-hereditary young women to his class in the Bharatiya Kala Kendra. One of these was Kumudini Lakhia, who ultimately emerged as one of India's foremost dance choreographers. Kumudini Lakhia arrived in Delhi with substantial dance experience; she had, like Maya Rao, studied Kathak with other teachers, but she had also spent a number of years dancing professionally and touring with Ram Gopal's Indian dance company. Coming to Delhi in 1958 for further study, Kumudini Lakhia brought an approach to staging, choreography, and dance itself that she had learned through the polished productions of Ram Gopal. As a senior student at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, she studied and performed solo Kathak and took leading roles in the two "Kathak ballets" the school produced in the late 1950s, but nonetheless grew increasingly dissatisfied with the emphasis placed on technical prowess and Hindu mythology. Her solution was modernist to the core: strip the dance form down to its choreographic essentials

and recombine the elemental cells of the movement vocabulary into productions with minimal sets, trim costumes, and contemporary or abstract themes. From her first independent productions in the early 1970s, Lakhia's work was strikingly original, and she has been the recipient of both praise and criticism for it. Although, like Rao, she has seen many of her innovations presented on stage and credited to others, she also believes that she had a positive influence on the hereditary Kathaks with whom she worked. In particular, her close professional association with Birju Maharaj, nephew of Shambhu Maharaj and the current leader of the hereditary Kathaks from Lucknow, undoubtedly shaped both his willingness to experiment and his later success in creating large-scale choreographies (Kumudini Lakhia, personal communication; Lakhia 1995; Shah 2005).

The contributions of Maya Rao and Kumudini Lakhia have met with both public acclaim and recognition, tempered with the criticism that frequently greets innovators and with the often disrespectful appropriation of their ideas. They remain simultaneously recognized and marginalized and both feel strongly that much of their strength and artistic freedom was possible because they eventually left Delhi—Rao to resettle in Bangalore where she directs the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography, and Lakhia to found Kadamb, her institution and dance company in Ahmedabad. It is Reba Vidyarthi, their fellow non-hereditary colleague, who remained in Delhi to teach, train, and mentor four decades of future Kathak stars and teachers. No less important, her role in the development of today's Kathak seems almost forgotten.

Reba Vidyarthi had studied Kathak as a young girl with Achchan Maharaj at Nirmula Joshi's School of Hindustani Music and Dance in the 1930s. She struggled against the disapproval of her conservative grandfather, who opposed her involvement in professional dance, and began to teach. She entered the Bharatiya Kala Kendra in 1960 as a scholarship student, but the organizers, impressed with her background, assigned her to teach the beginner class formerly taught by Maya Rao. She shifted quickly from student to teacher and designed a five-year diploma course through which all entering students needed to pass, creating exercises and repertoire which trained the young dancers' hands, minds, and bodies as surely as any western ballet curriculum. To this day, students studying with a Lucknow style graduate of the Delhi Kathak Kendra will most likely begin with Vidyarthi's exercises, although there is little chance they will know this. Her influence can also be seen in films of the star-studded Kathak

Kendra Production Unit from the 1980s—hereditary male and non-hereditary female dancers alike who had begun in her foundation class perform with a disciplined finesse and elegance that are a product of her training. Her legacy, however, is the most difficult to trace, as it rests not in films, programs, or choreographies, but in the bodies of her former students. If her students' biographies omit her name in the interest of linking themselves to the more prominent hereditary males, her contribution is effectively erased (Reba Vidyarthi, personal communication).¹¹

Not all of Reba Vidyarthi's students have dismissed her influence in their lives, however, and many of Maya Rao and Kumudini Lakhia's students proudly include their teachers' names in their biographies. Yet, an unequivocal recognition of the central role these ladies and the many others who have followed them as teachers, dancers, and choreographers have played in the creation of Kathak still eludes them. Ownership and stylistic authority still rest officially with the male Kathaks, and one can observe a type of cultural magnetic field which causes the efforts and creations of others to be credited to them. Yet the answer is clearly not to disenfranchise the Kathaks in turn; they are and were, by and large, excellent teachers and creative artists who, having grown up in musical families, present an internalized form of artistic knowledge inimitable by those who have trained outside their homes. The contributions of these men to the Kathak of today are undeniable, but the contributions of women, both hereditary and non-hereditary need to be equally recognized.

My research into the history of north India's "classical" dance form, Kathak, has uncovered a past that is a tangled web of multiple origins, castes and classes, musicians and dancers that combined to form the dance we know today in the early decades of the twentieth century (Walker 2004). The story is as syncretic and multifaceted as the dance itself, and calls the widely accepted unilinear story of an ancient temple dance into question. This essay has sought to redress one of the imbalances by exploring the role of women in Kathak's history and by addressing some reasons why women, both the hereditary *tavayafs* of the nineteenth century and the more elite women who replaced them, have more often than not become footnotes in the history of Kathak dance. Embracing a history of Kathak that is multilinear and firmly situated in contemporary events rather than ancient story-telling may finally aid us in placing women in the history of the dance we call Kathak.

Notes

*This essay is based on several past presentations on women's roles in Kathak dance (Walker 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, and 2006b). Research was done both through examination of historical documentation and ethnography. Funding for fieldwork trips to India in 2003 and 2006 was generously provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in Doctoral and Post-Doctoral Fellowships.

1. The origin of this vision of an ancient Hindu music, largely unrelated to the realities of contemporary performance practice, is usually attributed to (or blamed on) the eighteenth-century Orientalist scholar William Jones. Writing in 1784, Jones set a tone for more than two centuries of scholarship that has consistently attempted to trace Indian music back to Vedic origins, concentrating on Sanskrit sources of 500 hundred or more years ago while ignoring more recent documentation in Persian and Urdu (Jones 1882 [1784]).
2. It is important to observe that the word "Kathak" in reference to a discreet dance tradition, whether as "Kathak dance" (*kathak nritya*) or as "the dance of the Kathaks" (*kathak ka nritya*) does not predate the 1930s in written documents. While this does not mean that the term "Kathak dance" was not used before then, it is anachronistic to apply it to the dances of previous centuries, as the people of those times did not seem to refer to any particular dance specifically as "Kathak."
3. "Nautch" is an Anglicization of the Hindi/Urdu word *nach*, meaning dance. As the colonial observers were unable to distinguish between sophisticated performances of the courtesans and the more lascivious renditions by prostitutes, the term conflated all Indian dance into the immoral activity of "public women."
4. Also called the "Sepoy Mutiny," the First War of Independence took the form of a military uprising against the growing control of the British East India Company. A shift of political and military control from the Company to the British crown following the suppression of the struggle marked the beginning of Imperial rule and the "Raj."
5. I am grateful to Asma Siddiqi for her work in Urdu translation.
6. Khan equates the terms *gat* and *thaat* on page 160 (1884), and Kathak dance guru Reba Vidyarthi called this posture "the first *thaat*" (personal communication 2003).
7. There are four *gats* in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* (the "Crown" and "Flute" *gats*) which are clearly connected to the dance of Krishna. There is no reason the author would not have included similar information about the *Janasheen ki gat* if it were relevant.

8. One can actually "hear" this shift on early recordings when female singers at the end of their performances announce themselves as "amateur," that is, not professional and therefore not tavaayaf (Du Perron 2007: 61).
9. Undoubtedly, part of the initial motivation for founding the new dance institutions in Delhi was to remove the male artists from the contexts where they still worked with hereditary women.
10. This is, of course, a reference to hereditary occupation, not an indication of inherited talent.
11. It is regrettable, but worth noting, that Ashish Khokar's book celebrating the history and personalities of the Bharatiya Kala Kendra (1998) somehow omits her.

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